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SUBJECT: NETHERLANDS: TURKISH IMAMS DENIED RESIDENCE

PERMITS

REF: THE HAGUE 610

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Netherlands, new, tighter immigration policies are causing friction with the country's 436 mosques, which rely heavily on foreign-born clerics to lead their congregations. At least 18 Turkish mosques are without imams as a result of immigration delays. Meanwhile, the Netherlands is also seeking to replace all foreign imams with Dutch citizens effective 2008. If implemented strictly, this policy too could cause strains with the country's large Muslim minority. The imam issue is an apt symbol of the tightrope the Netherlands is walking on how to put a Dutch stamp on the country's Muslims without provoking a religious backlash. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) A GONL spokesperson confirmed to the press last week that the Dutch Immigration and Naturalization Service (IND) had denied residence permits to imams from 18 Turkish mosques in Amsterdam, Leeuwarden, Delft, Assen, Lelystad, Culemborg, and Boxtel. These imams had been admitted earlier to the country on so-called temporary "services passports." The spokesperson said the action was justified as these imams now intended to remain in the Netherlands and thus needed to follow standard immigration procedures, including the completion of an integration exam in their country of origin before obtaining a Dutch residence permit. The Netherlands' Civic Integration Examination Abroad became effective in March and requires intending immigrants to pass a series of tests on Dutch language and culture before obtaining a temporary residence permit (reported reftel). The new policies do not apply to immigrants from Western Europe, the United States, Canada, Japan or other developed countries, but they do apply to those from Turkey and Morocco, which supply the majority of the Netherlands' imams.

¶3. (SBU) Contacts at two mosques in The Hague told us some months back that the new policies could lead to friction. Yusuf Kalkan, a spokesperson for Diyanet (the Turkish state-sponsored religious bureau based at the Turkish Embassy in The Hague), told the press that Diyanet would consider joining Dutch mosque associations in legal action if the situation were not resolved. Diyanet controls approximately 180 of the country's 436 mosques. He also noted that many Turkish imams had completed Embassy-funded integration courses in the Netherlands. The Immigration Service spokesperson told the press that such courses were not a substitute for the required Embassy diploma, adding that the ministry would like the imams to take the test because there was a shortage of imams in the Netherlands.

¶5. (SBU) The Turkish DCM later told the Charge that Turkey

had been sparring with the Dutch government for months over the new immigration requirements, as well as a broader policy of replacing foreign imams with Dutch-born Muslims who have completed government-sponsored university programs designed to train Muslim clerics. This policy is set to take effect in 2008.

¶6. (SBU) The Turkish DCM said there was no practical way for the Dutch to train sufficient numbers of imams in such a short time and warned that some mosques might refuse to accept them. More broadly, he argued that Diyanet-sponsored imams are Turkish civil servants and thus unlikely to espouse radical views. The Netherlands, he said, was better off with them than with less predictable Dutch-trained clerics, regardless of citizenship.

¶7. (SBU) COMMENT: The Dutch government is not comfortable with having foreign-born imams leading the country's mosques and is committed to replacing them with Dutch Muslims, trained in the Netherlands. The emerging question is how the country's Muslim community will react now that such policies are having a real effect. Immigration and Integration Minister Verdonk's very hard line stance on immigration, and in particular, enforcement of the new integration regulations, has won her widespread unpopularity among the Dutch Muslim population, though her positions remain popular among much of the general population.

BLAKEMAN